



# **Natomas Oral Histories**

## **2015/027**

Oral interview of

## **Dr. Ting Sun and Charlie Leo of Natomas Charter School**

December 7, 2011, and February 17, 2012

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## **FIRST INTERVIEW, DECEMBER 7, 2011**

**Teri:** I'm here with Dr. Ting Sun and Charlie Leo from the Natomas Charter Schools. We are here today to talk about the history of the Natomas Charter School in the Natomas School District. Both of you started off as teachers at Natomas Junior High—

**Ting:** That's right.

**Teri:** — and came up with this idea of a charter school. When did this idea first start, and when did you start the first facility?

**Charlie:** Well, in 1992 after the charter school legislation passed, General, actually, took the initiative to hold meetings at two or three different locations—

**Teri:** That would be Superintendent General Davie.

**Charlie:** Yes. He was promoting the concept of charter schools as a way of incorporating education into the school district. Initially, actually, Ting brought it to my attention that there was this meeting about charter schools. I don't even recall if I attended.

**Ting:** I attended.

**Charlie:** So, Ting attended and told me about it afterward, because we had been — I'm sure we had lots of lunchroom ideas about if we were running the school we would do it this way, we wouldn't do this, we wouldn't do that. So suddenly we had the opportunity to put our money where our mouth is. So we started investigating more and thought it seemed like a relatively simple task, and that we had the support of Superintendent General Davie.

**Ting:** I think we naively thought it was a relatively simple thing to do. It was, when I reflect back on it, a perfect storm of various elements. One was that General was a new Superintendent coming into the district and he wanted to get some innovation going and he was one who really liked to pull stakeholders in and initiate reform from within. Another was that Charlie and I had been teaching at the traditional Natomas Junior High for five years. Five years is kind of a time where as professionals you reflect and ask yourself, what's next? I think too that that was the time that Nancy McCormick was retiring, leaving the district.

**Charlie:** That's right.

**Ting:** Nancy was a very strong principal at the Junior High, well thought of, very well respected. When there is a leadership change then the staff also has an opportunity for change as well. So I think politically all those elements came in and helped to push and launch an idea, a concept for a different, a little bit different type of middle school program.

**Charlie:** Ting and I initially questioned what we would do in the way of administration; neither of us had administration experience. What we did have was a great role model in Nancy. She was a master sergeant—

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** You couldn't help but learn from her based on how she performed, her routines, her processes. So we had a good start just from being around Nancy quite a bit. I think we were a little closer to Nancy as compared to most of the staff. She had trust in us, liked us as teachers, and had a lot of confidence in us. So we felt prepared to some degree, although we initially were wondering should we get an administrator, and we could just teach. We came to the conclusion that we could do this.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** We could do it without bringing somebody on board.

**Ting:** It was the charter concept of teachers really being able to become a different level of professional, where you could run your own educational program. So what you know in your classroom could be actually taken on a school-wide basis. That initially was my interest; a lot of things I was doing in my classroom, I wanted to initiate more on a school-wide basis.

[00:04:20]

**Charlie:** Yes. So we started pounding out this charter on our little eMac.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** One of the first Macintosh computers on the market. We thought this was the coolest thing in the world, that we could do this. We started pounding out the charter, we sat down with General; I think a couple of other administrators joined in a couple of times from the district office. We all really approached the charter together, with Ting and I having the most input. We brought it to the board — the board at the time, I'll have to think. Larry Meeks, Teri, Mike Wiley, Larry.

**Teri:** Bob Reinhart.

**Ting:** Was it Bob? Yes, it was Bob.

**Charlie:** And one other gentlemen. Bob Reinhart, but there was someone else. Was there seven?

**Teri:** No five, there were five.

**Ting:** There were some other board members as we started other programs. There were some hard questions. I remember some really hard questions from Teri. *[Laughter]*

**Teri:** Yes.

**Ting:** I remember we were like — oh, didn't think about that. *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** I don't know—

**Ting:** *[Laughter]* Also it was the beginning of the charter law when there wasn't a lot of restrictions. There were not a lot of rules. The support of the district was really important. The support of General specifically and the opportunity he was able to give to two teachers who wanted to do something educationally. That took a lot of trust.

**Teri:** So what was the program that you came up with?

**Charlie:** We felt there were several things that needed to be incorporated into a traditional middle school due to the nature of middle school kids. One was community service, getting out into the community, I should say, in some form or fashion, spending more time in the community learning about the real world. Not just sitting in a classroom all day long, boxed in. So we had to come up with some concepts for that. One was — one thing that would help with that is the racket club program, which, by the way, 19 years later is still in place, although, we are considering alternatives now.

**Teri:** Where did you have the racket club program?

**Charlie:** At the Natomas Racket Club. Basically, our students would go each Friday to the Racket Club and partake in about six, no, about four sessions of training by professionals at the Club. Of course, when our students arrived there they were just blown away by this nice facility that many of them did not even know existed there in Natomas. Quite a few of them became members later. It was a great program, and, as I said, still exists today. We still participate in the racket club program. So that was one. Another was job shadowing. With job shadowing, students every two weeks would be connected with organizations in Natomas, that either provided a service, a service of some kind typically, or an engineering firm. Some of the companies that we used back then were La Bou, Mary Inderkum, Spire, an engineering firm. Do you remember others?

**Ting:** A chiropractic office.

**Charlie:** A chiropractor—

**Ting:** Various businesses that were around Natomas—

**Charlie:** Quite a few. Chiropractors offered a whole interesting experience. When the students taught us how the guy took them up in a plane at Natomas Airport—

**Ting:** No permission. *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** Yes, no permission. We were not too excited about that.

[00:08:15]

**Ting:** The concept of the charter was very much based on the old “caught in the mill” framework for middle-schoolers. The concept that middle schoolers need something a little bit different than elementary and high schools. So we took educational components — thematic units, hands on learning, education technology, using technology as a tool for learning with community service as a way of going out, and then we wanted to involve parents into the program as well. So those five core areas were the

concept and the basis of the program, very much fitting the middle schoolers. It was targeted to the middle of the middle schoolers; it wasn't targeted to the low performing or the high performers, the GATE students. I was struggling with consistent C students in my classes. How do you motivate them? You know they have more potential than just a C. How do you motivate them, how do you push them, so they would come and strive for to be A and B students? Those additional pieces that we added were an incentive — that if they did well academically, if we were able to pull in their interest, academically they would perform better. So all those around that — if we support the large group in the middle, not the 10% above or the 10% below, but the 90% in the middle, that we could shift up overall as a group.

**Charlie:** Another component was getting them to think more about their education, their goals, and their objectives and whether or not they accomplished those things. So we revamped the assessment system, the report part, dramatically. So the DEP, Directional Education Plan, was incorporated as our assessment tool; Ting created that, so maybe you could say a few words about that.

**Ting:** Sure. We felt it was important that assessing students went beyond just testing, test scores, and grades. Also, we felt assessment needed to include performance elements, so collecting their student work and looking at it all as a body of work, that was part of the assessment as well.

**Teri:** If I remember correctly, there was a big technology component. That was kind of the selling point for this school.

**Ting:** Yes. So we — as you know, education is always a little behind on the technology, and this was twenty years ago and we think how quickly technology has grown since then. Twenty years ago, computers was the thing. We had some old Macintosh computers, Apple IIs in the junior high, and students were encouraged to use them for math games and all that. We wanted to take technology a little further. Part of what we researched and looked into was utilizing technology to collect their work, creating portfolios. At the time, there was something that was probably the precursor to PowerPoint; it was a somewhat animation-type program called HyperStudio where students could create presentations using animation to illustrate whatever they were learning. We were trying to use more cutting-edge technology to expand learning. At the time it was learning the whole Microsoft speak — oh, this is all so archaic now, as we're talking about it. *[Laughter]* What was the first set of computers we got, everybody was so blown away by them?

**Charlie:** I don't remember what they were called. One-piece Macintosh computers with 56 MG hard drive.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]* At the time, we had the old Apple IIe's or something. It was really kind of funky at the junior high at the time.

**Charlie:** These were heavy duty, high tech, incredible. Everybody was just jazzed when they walked into the lab and saw these.

**Ting:** Yes, we had to borrow from the District at the time. General loaned us money for that component of the program.

**Charlie:** Yes.

[00:12:50]

**Teri:** So where did you start this school?

**Charlie:** So basically we came to an agreement whereby we would utilize four classrooms at the Natomas Junior High School.

**Teri:** At the Del Paso Road site.

**Charlie:** Yes, that was where Ting and I were teachers, so it was very practical. We knew the campus, what was available, space was available. General worked out a plan that we could utilize classroom space there. This worked out real well. The only problem was we didn't have an office.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** My office was a handcart, literally a big plastic box. I walked back and forth to my classroom, to the lunchroom, spent most of my time on the phone in the teacher's lunch room. It was an enclosed class and in that way I could make my phone calls.

**Ting:** We were both teaching too. Charlie taught science, so three classes teaching and then the other half doing the administration. The first year, I taught English Language Arts the whole time. And because we didn't have a P.E. person the first year — we hired two teachers to teach social studies and math — for P.E. during my lunch and a couple of my friends I'd take kids out for P.E. during the four days when they were not at the racquet club. Crazy.

**Charlie:** It was insane.

**Ting:** It was insane. We created a calendar—

**Charlie:** We talked about how long we'd be able to keep up like this for even another year. It was 16-hour days, seven days per week. We were engaged physically, with all the moving—

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** The studio work we needed to do, whatever it took—

**Ting:** Hooking up the computers. Oh, and the other thing that I forgot to mention. General said we could start the school if we recruited students. I think it was eighty.

**Charlie:** Yes. Eighty.

**Ting:** So we started in 1992, in March to write the charter in the District, it was approved in May or June of '93, and then we opened the school in August or September of 1993. We had to get eighty students between April and August, something like four months. Charlie and I were out there holding community meetings, putting flyers up. We went to Bel Air on W. El Camino—

**Charlie:** We went to the Market way down on Northgate—

**Ting:** We put flyers in people's grocery bags— *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** We were doing everything we could think of. We took out a small ad in the *Sacramento Bee* — is this too much detail? We took out a small ad, 1x1, for \$60, which is what we could afford: “Come to this meeting; learn about another school option.” We were shocked that about 16 people showed up!

**Ting:** *[Laughter]* Wow!

**Charlie:** We gave them our little spiel and told them all the things we were going to do; we didn't know how we were going to do them yet. We hadn't talked to the Racquet Club yet, we had not finalized the computers yet—

**Ting:** *[Laughter]* Buy the dream people, buy the dream!

**Charlie:** They all bought into the vision. So we had some more meetings after that first one.

**Ting:** Yes.

**Charlie:** It was successful. We got about forty people signed up after about four or five of those meetings. We still were only halfway there. We continued having meetings and making phone calls. We called practically every parent in seventh grade at Natomas Junior High to see if they would be interested.

**Ting:** It did not make the other teachers happy.

**Charlie:** No. Right about August 15, we had our eighty students. So we opened our doors with eighty-one students.

[00:17:27]

**Teri:** So you start up with your eighty-one kids, and then what happened?

**Charlie:** The dream expands. Our vision within the Charter was to create additional educational programs at different grade levels to meet the needs of a diverse group of parents and students. After the first year, I should say during the second year, we felt it was time to start creating our next program. We decided to move forward with the home school concept: bringing home schooled students back into the public school system, particularly for the socialization aspect, which they don't receive at home. We heard a lot about home schools and home schoolers at our conferences. We saw that there was a demand for home school programs. There was not much offered at that time.

**Ting:** Many of the initial charters in the state were home school-type programs.

**Charlie:** We also knew realistically that if we were going to expand without funding, without money, that we needed to do it with facilities that were relatively inexpensive, and with a home school program, we could manage in a relatively small space. Our goal was to start with sixty students. We rented a space on West El Camino near the Jack in a Box. Right next door to the liquor store. We had one complaint that it was right next door there. We created the resource center there. It seems now, that it

was relatively quickly, without advertising. We've moved to advertising now. Marketing had taken another step.

**Teri:** You had moved by this point to having an administrator for your school. You realized that teaching full time and being an administrator was not working. You needed to have somebody to answer the phones.

**Ting:** Yes.

**Charlie:** We hired an administrator. We brought in a woman who was our secretary. She participated in the P.E. program too. Angie. Remember?

**Ting:** Yes. Let me go back a little bit. We started in the 1993/1994 school year. Now we're in the 1994/1994 school year. The original program, which we now call Leading Edge, moved to the Leroy Greene site; that was on West El Camino and Orchard. It was a brand-new site that the district had built and was housing the high school of the district at that time.

**Teri:** The district had just unified.

**Ting:** Yes, the district had just unified. There was a lot of unity with the district. I would say that Natomas Charter grew up with the district. We expanded the same time the district did — parallel growth. We shared the campus with the brand-new high school that the district had just built. The PACT program, which is the home school program that we have been talking about—

**Charlie:** Third year — the PACT program was not until the third year.

**Ting:** Ok, so in year 1994/1995, we're on that campus. Then 1995/1996 is that—

**Charlie:** 1993/1994 Natomas Junior High School, 1994/1995 Leroy Greene Middle School and we're developing conceptually the PACT program. In 1995/1996, we opened the PACT program on West El Camino in a strip mall next to the liquor store. *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** Yes.

**Ting:** It was opened as a resource center. It's a place where parents could come meet with the teacher and work on curriculum development. We had curricular resources — just like a little library inside. Vicki Rondeau who was librarian at the junior high—

**Charlie:** Natomas Junior High.

**Ting:** Vicki helped us with getting the system started. Linda Mulholland, at the time, and Danny Siegerson were elementary school teachers in the district at the time. I always like to say that Natomas Charter was a teacher-initiated charter. It was very much teacher based. So, every one of our programs were developed by working teachers who were in the classroom at the time. They were job sharing at the time — basically job shared the founding of the PACT program as well.



[00:22:31]

**Charlie:** Yes. Let's go from there.

**Ting:** So that was third year charter, PACT again.

**Charlie:** So you have two different sites going at this time. It is the second site for the first program.

**Ting:** Correct.

**Charlie:** So, at that point, after our second year, we had been impacted. We had expanded. We started with eighth grade only, then we expanded to seventh and eighth. I believe Natomas Junior High was seventh and eighth, too, so we were trying to keep things parallel with the district.

**Ting:** Yes.

**Charlie:** In our fourth year, 1996/1997, we came to an agreement to come to the Natomas Junior High site because Natomas Junior High was moving to the Leroy Green site. Discovery School and Natomas Charter would share a campus.

**Ting:** So we went back to the Del Paso Road site. So the fourth year we went back to Del Paso.

**Charlie:** Right. At that point, though, we occupied a good deal of the campus. Weren't we starting the Performing Fine Arts Academy then too?

**Ting:** Yes, that was starting then. PACT was still in the commercial site. PACT was how many students first?

**Charlie:** Sixty. That was why we needed a much larger part of the campus.

**Ting:** PACT expanded pretty quickly from sixty to one-hundred.

**Charlie:** It expanded pretty quickly so we had to move out of there. When we moved back to Natomas Junior High, PACT moved to another commercial location, about twice the size, near the post office on Northgate Boulevard. So PACT was there, it expanded to about one-hundred-twenty, and stayed there for about—

**Ting:** Three years? Four years?

**Charlie:** Yes, about three years.

**Ting:** PACT was ok. There was not a lot of controversy when we started PACT. Meanwhile, the Leading Edge program was continuing to grow. How many did we end up with in Leading Edge?

**Charlie:** One hundred and sixty,

**Ting:** We had three classes of eight — eighty-eight. Then the Performing and Fine Arts Academy. Then we got this idea: We were sharing the site at Leroy Green with the start-up of the high school. So there

was a music teacher there at the time starting up a music program and we saw the struggles he had in getting his program up and running. We said, "Let's start up an arts-focused program."

**Charlie:** We looked back at our vision, fulfilling our vision to offer a variety of options. As we talked with art teachers, particularly this one musician at Natomas High School, we realized that arts were basically being cut out dramatically. I was looking at it, too, from a supply and demand position. Where are these kids going to go to get that education if they want to be artists? So I said let's propose a performing and fine arts program to the district.

**Ting:** Yes.

[00:26:30]

**Charlie:** Some controversy started. Not a lot, not major road blocks, but some questions came up at that time. We were competing with the new high school. How dare we? What makes you think you can open up a high school when we're having a hard time doing it. You're little junior high school teachers—

**Ting:** Yes. *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** We understood that. They were all reasonable questions. We also felt very confident that we could take it on. At this point we knew that whatever we took on we could make it successful. It was a matter of learning, bringing the energy and time to it.

**Ting:** It was a matter of finding good people.

**Charlie:** We still had the energy. We were still in our early thirties. Ting was still in her late twenties.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** at this point. We still had the energy to do this, putting in the extra time, extra days. So we continued to go forward, approaching the board, putting our plan together. With a little bit of controversy, the board approved the program. That is also when they approved us moving back to the old Natomas Junior High site. We started with ninth and tenth grade only that year. We stayed there. Every program was settled. PACT was settled, Performing and Fine Arts Academy, PFAA, was settled, Leading Edge was settled—

**Ting:** At the Del Paso site.

**Charlie:** At the same time, we were continuing to grow in numbers. PACT was continuing to grow, Leading Edge stayed pretty much at that size. We'd decided to keep it at that size; PFAA was expanding and the demand was really surprising. Although a lot of those students were from the district at that time. That was 1997/1998. By the following year, it was obvious we were going to need a bigger site. Everyone was supporting our programs because they were successful.

**Teri:** We needed some specialized facilities as well.

**Charlie:** Yes, absolutely. Kids were dancing on carpets, instrumental music classes were in a 900 square foot portable, so there were some serious challenges facilities-wise.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** Bond money was coming in left and right from the state, so there were good times. The school board at that time felt — well, they were supportive except for one individual.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** They basically could afford the additional student units for construction. We moved forward with the site. I convinced Tom Winn and his brother to convert a commercial site to a school site. It was a win-win: It would help to bring home buyers into the area. At the time, the market needed home buyers. It wasn't like a few years later when they could care less. So it was good timing for us. We got the support. In fact, they contributed the first \$100,000 to expanding the PFAA program and eventually building the theatre. They knew that we were not going to have a theatre on this initial campus. There was not enough money for that.

## **SECOND INTERVIEW, FEBRUARY 17, 2012**

**Teri:** Ok, so we're back now with Charlie Leo and Ting Sun. This is Teri Burns, it is February 17, and we're going to continue the discussion about the Natomas Charter School growth and development. So when we were talking before, you were just in the process — you have spoken with developers about changing the charter school property to being a school site. There was some bond money out there and you were needing some special facilities. What happened as you went through developing that site?

**Charlie:** Ok, as we were making progress with designing a new campus, the challenge as usual was funding. At that time, the real estate market was just starting to pick up a bit in Natomas, so there was property available and the developers who were willing to support schools for their particular neighborhoods. We worked with the school board pretty closely; the school board at that time was very supportive of Natomas Charter School, the only charter school in the district. So we came up with the game plan of a small campus, excluding a theatre at the time. However, knowing that we would have a space for a theatre down the line, we had this property designed — let me go back a bit to say we found property, which was 13 acres, which would be suitable for a nice-sized campus and a theatre, particularly to accommodate the Performing Arts academy. Mike and Tom Winn agreed to sell a piece of commercial property to the school district and they also agreed to provide some seed money of \$100,000 to start to initiate the design for the theatre and initiate the fundraising for the theatre. There was some local bonds passed and some state bond money as well. The charter school participated in the passage of the local bond by assisting with telephones, solicitations and things of that matter. So we went forward there and had our campus built —

**Teri:** The bond passed.

**Charlie:** The bond passed. The teachers were really excited to actually have a dance classroom rather than a carpeted room for dance.

**Teri:** Tell us a little bit about how that building was built. That was not your basic stick and —

**Charlie:** We worked with a company, Meehleis Modular, who was building modular buildings, doing half of their construction in their shops, and bringing the pieces onto the campus, so there was a savings there. Particularly at that time, the savings seemed to be greater than they are today for that same construction model. We worked with Meehleis. It was the rainiest winter in a couple of decades. We spent a lot of time waiting in the trailer, talking with the architect and the construction group, waiting for the rain to stop. Eventually, we had about six months remaining before the school year was to open. In fact, the school year opened late because we were still without certain facilities, particularly restrooms. So opening day we had about 70% of our facilities completed, and lots of port-a-potties. So that was the start of our current program, our main campus at Black Rock and Del Paso.

[00:04:10]

**Teri:** Where was the PACT actually located on the campus?

**Charlie:** It was located in building C, which is a building that was designed specifically for home schooling. So that worked out well for a few years.

**Teri:** It was easy for parents to drive up to that end of the campus and not be going through the rest of the campus.

**Charlie:** Right.

**Ting:** It was actually nice at that point to have all four programs on the campus.

**Charlie:** Three. We didn't have ILP yet.

**Ting:** ILP had not been created in 2000. It was created pretty soon, though, right after that—

**Charlie:** It was a couple of years later.

**Ting:** Ok, a couple of years later. Really?

**Charlie:** Yes.

**Ting:** I came back right at that time in 2000 on to the campus and ILP.

**Charlie:** We had an unnamed independent study program that was tied to PFAA — but it was not yet a formal independent study program.

**Ting:** But ILP had begun officially by at least 2002/2003. What I was going to say was, when we were all a part of the same campus, it really felt like we were a whole school. There was always capability for home school students and PACT students to take some classes from the middle school and in PFAA. There was finally a sense of “we’re one community,” whereas before when we were physically in different locations, people would say, “Which one is the Natomas Charter school? Is it PACT, no, no its Leading Edge, no Natomas Charter school is PFAA.” The parents, the teachers, didn’t really have a sense of the whole. It was nice to have that but we pretty soon, really, really quickly grew out of that campus.

**Charlie:** Yes, but it didn't take long for us to grow out of our campus. Since that time, we've added at least 30%, maybe more, to that campus, maybe half, maybe we've doubled the size of it when you consider the gymnasium that's been added, the theatre, outdoor eating area, additional classrooms. I'd say we've probably doubled the size of the original campus.

[00:06:57]

**Teri:** Talk about the theatre, if you would.

**Charlie:** The theatre — once again you have the situation where we had been planning a theatre for four or five years. We went through several models, several designs, we finally decided, let's go for the whole shebang, let's have a nice theatre for Natomas, a fully functional theatre, just as a professional theatre would be designed. We did that—

**Teri:** So that was more than the other high schools have.

**Charlie:** Right.

**Teri:** What is significantly different about it?

**Charlie:** It has a full-fly system, which means that they can raise and lower sets. You have to have a certain height design so sets can actually go into the roof portions of the structure.

**Teri:** So a portion of the structure is five stories tall.

**Charlie:** Yes, it is five almost six stories tall. So that was pretty exciting. Another local bond — the district was going for another local bond and we participated rather heavily in getting that bond passed, our parents did. As a result, we did contribute substantially, and the district did what they agreed to do and that was share a portion of those bond funds with Natomas Charter for the completion of the theatre.

**Teri:** How large is the theatre?

**Charlie:** It seats about 360 people. It is about 10,000 square feet, a full-size stage, a full fly system, a nice lobby for community art exhibits, as well as student art exhibits, of course. It is really a nice quality theatre.

**Teri:** So you share the theatre — who all uses the theatre?

**Charlie:** In the community? The Natomas Charter School has a performance, so they always have preference as far as scheduling. Other groups that use the theatre is certain local dance groups, such as — what are some of those?

**Ting:** Core Collective—

**Charlie:** Core Collective Dance, Sacramento Ballet, Sacramento Philharmonic, lots of local groups — which Latino groups?

**Ting:** Ballet Folklorico—

**Charlie:** So is there an organization that books those?

**Ting:** We do it — because from the very beginning it was intended to be community connection for our school, particularly our arts program. One of the tenets in Natomas Charter is community connections. So the theatre was one of the bridges that we have for our students as well as the community. So we took on the task of basically taking care of the theatre, promoting it as a community theatre, renting, managing it — it's been a bit of a tough task. It's part of our Arts and Outreach Coordinator's job. We find that when some community groups or even national groups contact us and want to use the theatre, we give them a nonprofit rate and then part of what they do is they come and do master classes for our students. It is a nice little exchange, where they can utilize our theatre for less cost than they would get anywhere else but at the same time they are giving back to us by working with our students. It has been a nice thing but it has been a lot of management, a lot of time on our part to make that happen. We try to promote it. Down Del Paso Road here we have those banners that try to promote the Benvenuti Performing Arts Center.

**Teri:** How did it end up as the Benvenuti Performing Arts Center?

**Charlie:** Part of the deal with the district was that in addition to the local bond, we were going to raise a million dollars to do our fair share of putting the effort into this project. So we agreed to raise a million dollars in order to get the balance of the funding. I sold everything from bricks, to benches, to naming rights. Jim Gately, who is a partner with the Benvenuti organization, JB Properties, after continually bombarding him with phone calls for several months when I wasn't expecting it, Jim said that he was interested in purchasing the naming rights as a gift for Joe and Nancy's 50th anniversary.

**Teri:** And, that's what they did. So, were the Benvenutis surprised? Did we do something special for them?

**Charlie:** I think initially they were pleased. It was a bigger thing for us than for them. However we did have an opening gala, a large part of the family attended, and they were excited about it at that time. In reality, we really haven't seen the Benvenutis since that time. Jim has continued to be supportive by doing a few additional things. For example, recently he purchased the sign that goes onto the theatre. We really haven't got a lot of support from the Benvenuti family directly.

**Ting:** The name has stuck. We have a website, [benarts.org](http://benarts.org), that posts all the different venues that are in there, and the students now call it "the Ben," so the name has stuck and it has worked well. "The Ben" is how it is known.

[00:12:52]

**Teri:** You said you outgrew that campus. Where else are you now?

**Charlie:** Now we're back to three campuses again. We have the main campus, which houses our ILP program, which is our advanced study program, which came about two years, officially two years, after we moved onto that campus. We have our Leading Edge program and the Performing Arts Academy on that campus. Since that time, we found that it was very practical to have the Home School program placed outside of the campus once again so we were able to make room for the IOP program and also free up a couple of classrooms for the growth of the Performing Arts Academy.

**Ting:** Yes. One of the reasons we moved PACT off the site and went into a commercial building — a couple of years ago we went through a WASC process. The PACT program was growing and there was a huge demand for classes, and more offsite classes.

**Teri:** And the WASC program is the accreditation process.

**Ting:** Yes WASC is the state accreditation program. Actually, one of the recommendations that came out of the WASC was the PACT needed bigger space and more class space. This was one of the things that the parents really wanted. So that was one of the impetuses for moving PACT off. ILP was again beginning to grow and we needed more classes as well. Many of our two non-site-based programs are hybrid programs and what we found was that parents and students were really demanding more of the hybrid where they could be on-campus a certain amount of the time, where they could take classes. So to accommodate these requests, we needed more space. So PACT moved off.

**Teri:** Where did they move to?

**Charlie:** What happened with PACT was we found a building, an empty shell, basically a large warehouse off National Drive in north Natomas, just outside of the district boundaries. You can have satellite home school programs outside the school district boundaries, by law you're allowed to do that. We took that shell and designed a facility that accommodated PACT perfectly. That has worked out really well. Probably within that commercial industrial area, we have no doubt the nicest looking building there. The parents are extremely pleased. Despite initially resisting the move, once again from on-campus to off-campus, once they saw the sight they were thrilled.

**Ting:** Except now in 2011/2012 they're feeling they don't have enough room again and they want more classes. So now we are at another point where we are struggling with, how can we expand to provide more classes and space for them?

**Charlie:** One of the things we started recently, jumping ahead a bit — we started a kindergarten, K-5 program. We started with kindergarten only, and just by sheer coincidence a space became available immediately next door to the current PACT program. So we grabbed that, just in time to start the school year, usual style. We designed a little space to accommodate two classes of kindergarteners. That worked out really well. So when the kindergarten moved to a larger space, we had the room for growth; however, the PACT program liked the fact that we had space next door and kind of moved in before we had time to terminate the lease.

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** So to this day we still have that space. We are in the process now of determining which direction to go with that space. We are looking at potentially placing our recently redesigned independent study program which is going to be a virtual learning academy into that space, which means they would be moving off our main campus, as one option. The other option would be to keep the virtual learning academy where it is on the main campus and let PACT expand into that space, but this is a little harder to justify.

[00:17:33]

**Teri:** We moved a little ways away from the main campus —recently you’ve added another building there. Talk with us about that.

**Charlie:** The gymnasium. The gymnasium was the last building that we built. Once again we went to Meehleis Modular, a modular construction company. They had advanced to the point where they now could actually build large structures such as a gymnasium using modular components. We basically went through a similar process with a local bond, and a loan, the combination of bond and a local loan from the school district. As well as — did we get some units from the state for that building? We might have gotten units from the state as well for that building. So with the assistance of the district, and a loan, we had the gymnasium built. A beautiful gymnasium, used quite a bit by outside groups. In fact, it is probably occupied every night now.

**Teri:** When did that open?

**Charlie:** That was 2009, yes 2009. So it has been open almost three years now.

**Teri:** You had a place in the initial design on the campus for this, but that would eventually go.

**Charlie:** Actually no, not really. We never really intended to have a gymnasium as part of the master plan, but fortunately we had enough blacktop space to where we could utilize that space should we build a gymnasium. There was really a strong need, particularly because we were building up our middle school physical education program both for the Performing Arts Academy and the Leading Edge program, so we did everything we could do to redesign that blacktop area/playground area to accommodate one of these modular gymnasiums.

**Teri:** So the initial design of that campus is now built out, you’re not missing any buildings.

**Charlie:** It is built out. I’m sure there will be construction on that campus at some point. In fact, right now we’re looking at potentially, because our instrumental music program has grown so substantially, it has outgrown its space, we’re looking at potentially using building C, which was once PACT and IOP, and taking that space and raising the roof literally and converting it into a large music room.

**Teri:** You talked about moving the kindergarteners out. I assume you are continuing that program. Where will they be?

**Charlie:** The kindergarteners are currently on Commerce, sharing space with the West Lake Charter School in a large facility that was designed for an automotive education institution. So they are operating out of there currently. We’re good there for another 14 or 15 months, this school year and next. Right now we’re evaluating all our possible sites and direction. While considering that we are under a building moratorium right now.

**Teri:** Which means what to us?

**Charlie:** A building moratorium means for us basically that nothing can be constructed from the ground up. For example, we have a piece of property immediately across the street from us, owned once again by the Benvenutis.



**Teri:** Across the street from where?

**Ting:** The main campus.

**Charlie:** Yes, across from the main campus. They finally agreed to sell us the property if we can buy it, but unfortunately there is little revenue for building, and there is a building moratorium, so most investors are unwilling to purchase a piece of land that they cannot build anything on. What we'll probably do once the building moratorium is lifted, the charter school will either purchase the land or have an investor come in and purchase the land, construct the building, and lease it back, or finance it to the charter school.

[00:22:05]

**Ting:** Right now, programmatically, we are five programs split between three different campuses. What this has done is now we're feeling split again. It is difficult on the administrators to move between campuses. It doesn't give us a sense of cohesion. Really, essentially what Charlie is talking about is if we were ever able to purchase the land and build on it, then we would have essentially one campus again. Building off of Del Paso would bring the programs together. Long term, it would really be nice for us to be able to be one campus again. We've pretty much said that we're done with any additional programs.  
[Laughter]

**Charlie:** Yes.

**Ting:** These are growing and we would like to see them grow, but not start any others. It would be nice to have them closer together so we could share resources.

**Charlie:** Yes.

**Teri:** How many students do you have at this time?

**Ting:** We're approaching 1,400, approximately 1,360. We're looking at approximately 1,400 next year, 1,400-1,500. These additional students would come from the STAR Academy, natural growth of moving into the second grade.

**Teri:** The Star Academy is the—

**Charlie:** The K-5 program. In our independent study program we're thinking and hoping that we'll pick up an additional 50 students as we become a virtual learning program rather than the traditional independent study program.

**Teri:** So you're happy with the growth of the program?

**Ting:** [Laughter]

**Charlie:** We're very happy with the growth, but we've definitely come to the conclusion that this is it. Five programs, five spokes in the wheel, as we had originally intended nineteen plus years ago. So any growth would be internal growth. Performing Arts Academy really can't grow, nor can Leading Edge. So

the growth would come from, as we said previously, the additional grades to the STAR Academy as we go from K-5, I mean from K1 to K5 *[buzzing sound]* — coincidentally that is the architect calling—

**Ting:** *[Laughter]*

**Charlie:** Also from our home school academy, potentially — it fluctuates fifteen to twenty students per year — and then our independent study program.

**Ting:** As I take over as executive director next year — we are looking more at deepening programs, not growing new ones. We continuously look back at what the original intent was, are we following the original intent, so without looking at expanding the school at this point.

**Teri:** Well, thanks very much for your time and good luck in the next twenty years.